

# Our Boys and Girls

## APPLES OF GOLD.

"These apples," said Uncle Joe, pointing to a dozen straggling trees, "never have received the attention which they deserve. I could see that as soon as I took hold of the place. The man who was here last let things go plumb to ruin. And yet Ryder tells me they're about the most valuable trees on the whole place. He ought to know."

Uncle Joe paused and waited for Lemuel to speak. Lemuel nodded his head. "He ought to know," he agreed. "He set them out, didn't he, sir?"

"Yes, he set them out. He says that even when they were very small trees, he got good results from them. Then his wife got sick and he had to give up the ranch. He rented it, and hoped to come back to it, but he never did. One man after another had the place, and helped it on its road to ruin. As a general rule, renters aren't of much account. It's when a man owns a thing that he takes an interest in it, and works it for all it's worth. There's a deal of difference between mine and thine."

"But I should think they'd have taken care of these trees for the profit in them," said Lemuel. "While they had a lease of the place, it means really more to them than to the owner."

"I suppose it was because there were so many other orchard trees that they didn't think it worth while to bother with these. But Ryder assures me that good care of the trees would repay anyone."

Lemuel waited for what he knew was coming. So many things on the run-down farm had been turned over to him, it all was beginning to seem like thankless and discouraging work.

"I hate it!" he thought to himself. "I don't want to work on a farm, anyway; I want to go to college. Uncle Joe knows that, but he doesn't care a cent. All he cares about is to have me lick this worthless farm into shape."

He waited respectfully enough, though, for Uncle Joe to make his wishes known. Lemuel knew the formula quite well:

"Suppose you take this, Lem, and see what you can make of it. It's a great privilege for a boy of your years to be able to help turn ruin into success."

Uncle Joe always said something like that. He put it as if it were a favor to Lemuel. Straggling flower beds, scrubby calves, pigs that were too thin, and chickens that were too fat—Lemuel had had a taste of it all. He did not wish to add the care of the trees to his numerous other chores.

"And I've been thinking," Uncle Joe broke in on his thoughts, "that it'd be a mighty good thing, Lem, if you were to take these trees under your sole charge and see what you could make of them. It's a fine thing for a boy"—

"But I don't understand the care of apples, or any other fruit," objected Lemuel, looking down at the toe of his shoe instead of into his uncle's eyes.

"Well, we all have to learn. We keep learning all our lives, one way or the other. And what you learn usually comes in mighty useful, sooner or later. Learning is no burden to carry."

"I'm hungry enough for some kinds of learning," said Lemuel, half under his breath.

"We never can tell just what particular

branch of learning will be of most account to us. Men have saved their lives by understanding how to swim, or knowing an antidote for snake bite."

"But not by caring for apples," argued Lemuel, in the still sulky tone.

"I'm not so sure of that. 'An apple a day keeps the doctor away.' Those old sayings didn't come down to us for nothing. It looks to me like apples could take a front seat as health preservers, anyhow."

"I hate caring for them! I hate the farm!" Lemuel said to himself.

Uncle Joe looked shrewdly at his sullen face. When he spoke, he put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I've been thinking I'd turn these trees over to you for the season, Lemuel, if you don't mind. I'll be pretty busy elsewhere. But I'd like to be sure that these trees were receiving the attention which they deserve. Do you think you could manage them?"

The kind tone and the kind eyes worked their usual spell.

"I can try, sir," Lemuel answered. "I'll do my level best."

"That's the way to talk!" praised Uncle Joe. "That's the way I knew you'd talk. I can give you a book about caring for the trees. You'll have to study it out yourself. I don't suppose I'll be over here again until your crop is ready for the market. Everything is to be left to you. If you think better to go one way, no one shall bid you go another. You're under no one, responsible to no one. As you boys say nowadays, 'It's all up to you.'"

Lemuel wasn't just sure that he liked that, though the words had had a pleasant enough sound at the time. Now, as he looked moodily at the task before him, he fancied that he would rather not have the sole responsibility.

"If anything goes wrong, I'll get the whole blame. And if all goes right and I make good, of what use will it be to me? It'll just be another raft of dollars for Uncle Joe's fat pocket. I wish I had had the courage to tell him right out that I didn't want to undertake any such job."

At dinner time Uncle Joe spoke once more of the apples. "I wouldn't have trusted everyone as I've trusted you, Lem," he said. "I feel about as sure of a good crop of apples as if they were in the commission merchant's hands, and the check in mine."

He laughed as he said it. Aunt Mee smiled over the table, too, into the boy's eyes. "You're getting to be quite a man, Lemmy," she said. "Uncle Joe tells me he is trusting you with the whole crop."

"I don't feel any bigger," said Lemuel, smiling back.

Dinner over, Uncle Joe brought forth a book on the care and culture of apples. Even before Lemuel opened it, it looked uninteresting. As he hastily scanned a paragraph here and there, it seemed more so.

"Whew!" he said. "I don't believe my head is big enough to contain all that's in this book."

"Why, I thought you hoped to go to college some day?"

"Yes, I had hoped to," corrected Lemuel a little disagreeably.

"Well, if your wish, or hope, or whatever it was, should come true, you'd find you had to

master a whole lot more than you'll find in that book."

"Ah, but I'd like that!"

Lemuel spoke softly and Uncle Joe did not appear to hear.

In the morning Lemuel found that most of his duties had been relegated to the hired man. The care of a few animals was all that was left of his numerous chores. Uncle Joe apparently regarded the apple experiment as engrossing.

Lemuel dawdled around for a day or so, reading in the book, trying to find his bearings. More than once he walked over to the far field where the few trees were, but he did not attempt any work.

The time, too, for beginning work on fruit trees was at hand. All of the neighboring orchards were being plowed. Uncle Joe had his own teams plowing his orchard. But the trees that stood most in need of attention still flaunted their bare, gnarled branches at their new caretaker.

Uncle Joe worried over it openly to Aunt Mee. "I can't understand why Lem don't get to work on those trees," he said. "He must see that the work on fruit is going on all around him. They'll be beyond him in another month. I can't see why he doesn't get after them. If he doesn't do so soon, the trees'll be a dead loss. I don't understand it. Can I have been mistaken in my own sister's boy?"

Aunt Mee's smile was comforting. "Lemmy'll see 'fore it's too late," she replied.

"He'll have to see pretty soon, then. If there was more time, I shouldn't be worrying. But there isn't. And, win or lose, I can't say a word to him."

"Time enough to worry when there's cause."

"By then it'll be too late."

"Maybe he doesn't understand the need for hurry," ventured Aunt Mee.

"Yes, he does. That's what worries me."

Lemuel indeed did understand that the time to begin work was at hand. And yet as the days passed, he felt less inclined to do so than he had at first. A chance word from the hired man had awakened hard and bitter feelings which Lemuel kept strictly to himself. They were not the less strong for remaining untold. In the days that followed, he thought over them many times.

"I don't see why I should slave this way for Uncle Joe, when he has all that money," he thought. "He has no right to expect it of me. He could afford to throw those few old trees into the pond instead of making me work to save them. He could have sent me to college as well as not if he'd wanted to."

That was the thing that rankled and hurt. While not exactly speaking of his poverty, Uncle Joe had led him to suppose that what money he had was invested in land, where it was not readily available.

Lemuel thought it out and fought it out for the better part of a week. Then he raised his head with a look Uncle Joe would have rejoiced to see. "I'll work them up, anyway. I'll go at them for all I'm worth," he resolved. "I can't do less than that. I promised it. And, even if uncle is tight about money, he has done enough for me to expect help from me, whether I want to do it or not."

The resolution to work once taken, Lemuel began with a will. He borrowed two of the horses, and plowed and replowed the starved old soil around the bare trees. He packed tons of fertilizer and leaf mold over the ground. He worked a few days for a neighbor, who in return showed him how to prune.

No trees in the county received better attention. Lemuel worked over them early and late. He threw himself into the task of making some-